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ABSTRACT

This digest provides basic information and resources on visual impairments. Legal and educational definitions are given for "legally blind," "partially sighted," "visually handicapped," "blind," and "low vision". Typical characteristics of individuals with visual impairments in the areas of cognitive and social development are noted. Educational implications are identified, including mainstreaming, special services needed, and effects of additional disabilities. Fourteen organizational resources are listed and a bibliography of six items is provided. (DB)

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#E511

VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

What is meant by *visual impairments*?

For legal and administrative purposes, the following definitions are used:

- *Legally blind*: Central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with correction, or, if greater than 20/200, a field of vision no greater than 20 degrees at the widest diameter.
- *Partially sighted*: Central visual acuity between 20/70 and 20/200 in the better eye correction.

For functional educational purposes these definitions are used:

- *Visually handicapped*: Requires special educational provisions because of visual problems (Barraga & Erin 1991).
- *Blind*: Has either no vision or, at most, light perception (Barraga & Erin 1991). Students learn through the use of braille or related media without the use of vision.
- *Low vision*: Has severe visual impairment after correction but visual function can be increased through the use of optical aids and environmental modifications (Corn & Ryser, 1989). Students with low vision learn from vision and other senses. Functional vision will depend on factors such as lighting, use of optical aids and devices, tasks, and personal characteristics. Modifications in lighting, size of print or objects, and distance may be required.

Common visual impairments include refractive errors that affect visual acuity such as myopia, hyperopia, and astigmatism; cataracts; visual field defects; accommodative difficulties; forms of muscle imbalances resulting in impaired binocular vision; and cortical visual impairment.

What are some typical characteristics of individuals with visual impairments?

The degree to which visual impairments affect development depends on the type of visual loss, severity, age of onset, intellectual ability, and environmental experiences. The lack of vision or reduced vision may result in delays or limitations in motor, cognitive, and social development. Without visual input, an infant may not be motivated to reach and move toward interesting objects in the environment. As soon as the infant with a visual impairment finds it exciting to hear sounds, he or she will begin to reach and move toward the objects in the environment that make sound. This does not occur until several months later, since hearing sounds does not motivate movement toward objects as soon as seeing objects does.

Cognitively, the child who has a visual impairment cannot perceive objects in the environment beyond his or her grasp, including those that are too large or too small or are moving. While use of other senses enables the child to obtain information about the environment, a cognitive limitation does exist in the range and variety of experiences.

Socially, a child with a visual impairment is limited in interaction with the environment. The child cannot see the facial expressions of parents, teachers, and peers; cannot model social behaviors through imitation; and sometimes is unaware of the presence of others unless a sound is made. While touch provides direct information, it is often socially unacceptable. The older child is limited in the ability to orient to environmental cues and travel freely.

What are the educational implications of visual impairments?

Academically oriented students with visual impairments have been mainstreamed successfully into regular classes for many years. They receive instruction from specially trained teachers in the additional skills necessary to increase independence. The unique curriculum for students who are blind includes reading and writing through the use of braille, listening skills, personal-social and daily living skills, orientation and mobility, career education, and instruction in the use of special aids and equipment. In addition to these areas, students with low vision and visual limitations may need instruction in the efficient use of vision and in the use of optical aids and alternative learning materials. A high proportion of students with visual impairments have additional disabilities and may require a curriculum that emphasizes functional living skills and communication skills.

Educational settings and services for children with visual impairments vary according to individual needs. Self-contained classrooms, residential schools, or regular classrooms with or without special assistance may be appropriate options for individual students.

Resources

American Council of the Blind
1155 15th Street, NW, Suite 720
Washington, DC 20005
202/467-5081 or 800/424-8666
Publishes: The Braille Forum

American Foundation for the Blind
15 West 16th Street
New York, NY 10011
212/620-2000 or 800/232-5463
Publishes: Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness
Directory of Agencies Serving Visually Handicapped in the U.S.

Ferrell, K. (1984). *Parenting Preschoolers: Suggestions for Raising Young Blind and Visually Impaired Children*
Ferrell, K. (1985). *Reach Out and Teach*

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Hazenkamp, J., & Huebner, K. M. (1989). *Program Planning and Evaluation for Blind and Visually Impaired Students: National Guidelines for Excellence*

Martinez, I., & Corn, A. (1990). *When You Have a Visually Handicapped Child in Your Classroom: Suggestions for Teachers*

Scholl, G. (Ed.). (1986). *Foundations of Education for Blind and Visually Handicapped Children and Youth*

American Printing House for the Blind
1839 Frankfort Avenue
P. O. Box 6085
Louisville, KY 40206
592/895-2405

Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AERBVI)
206 North Washington Street, Suite 320
Alexandria, VA 22314
703/548-1884
Publishes: RE:view

Blind Children's Center
4120 Marathon Street
Los Angeles, CA 90029
213/664-2153
Informational booklets:
Dancing Cheek to Cheek, interactive communication
Heart to Heart, family experiences
Learning to Play, play activities
Move It, early motor development (ED 150 790)
Move with Me, physical activities
Talk to Me I, language development
Talk to Me II, language development (ED 261 490)

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind
1931 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
Canada, M4G 4C8
416/480-7580

Division for the Visually Handicapped
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091
703/620-3660

International Institute for Visually Impaired
c/o Blind Children's Fund
144 Hancock Street
Auburndale, MA 02166

National Association for the Visually Handicapped
3201 Balboa Street
San Francisco, CA 94121
415/221-3201

National Association of Parents of the Visually Impaired
2180 Linway Drive
Beloit, WI 53511
608/362-1380 or 800/562-6265

National Coalition for Deaf-Blindness
c/o Perkins School for the Blind
175 North Beacon Street
Watertown, MA 02172
617/972-7220

National Federation of the Blind
1800 Johnson Street
Baltimore, MD 21230
410/659-9314
Publishes: Braille Monitor (Monthly) — in print, cassette, or disc
Future Reflections (Quarterly)
Willoughby, D. (1979). *A Resource Guide for Parents and Educators of Blind Children*

Library of Congress
National Library Service
Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped
1291 Taylor Street, NW
Washington, DC 20542
202/707-5100 or 800/424-9100

Recording for the Blind, Inc.
20 Roszel Road
Princeton, NJ 08540
609/452-0606

Bibliography

Barraga, N., & Erin, J. (1991). *Visual handicaps and learning: A developmental approach.* PRO-ED, Inc., 88700 Shoal Creek Boulevard, Austin, TX 78757.

Corn, A., & Ryser, G. (1989). Access to print for students with low vision. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness, 3*(7), 340–349.

ERIC/OSEP Special Project. (1987). *Orientation and mobility for blind infants.* (Research and Resources in Special Education No. XIII.) The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091 (ED 298 680).

Martin, G. J., & Hoben, M. (1977). *Supporting visually impaired students in the mainstream.* (ED 145 609).

Rogow, S. (1988). *Helping the visually impaired child with developmental problems: Effective practice in home, school, and community.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Scholl, G. T. (1980). *Self study and evaluation guide for day school programs for visually handicapped pupils: A guide for program improvement.* (ED 192 483).

ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) References

In the references above, ED numbers refer to ERIC documents, which are usually accessible on microfiche at a local ERIC provider. Paper copies may be ordered by contacting the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, VA 22153-2852. Phone: 800/443-ERIC, 703/440-1400.

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The Council for Exceptional Children

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